

Field Report

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park

■ 1.0 Summary

The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park (NHP) is the first unit of the NPS to focus on the theme of conservation history and the changing nature of land stewardship in America. It is located in Woodstock, Vermont and first opened in June 1998. The site consists of the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller Mansion (with adjacent residential buildings, gardens, and grounds), and the surrounding 555-acre forest land and pastures. It is also Vermont's first national park.

As the Park is new, planning information is limited. Visitor projection estimates indicate that visitation levels could reach 80,000 during the May–October season by the year 2004. A General Management Plan (GMP) has been completed and supporting reports are still being developed. A transportation study was conducted in 1995 which indicated the impact of park visitation in the short-term on the town of Woodstock would be minimal.

There are no current plans to significantly expand or alter the Park. The Park is still addressing general maintenance and planning issues since it has only been open for one year.

Potential Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) for the site and its environs include the following:

- **Horse-drawn carriages into the Park to permit more visitors to see the Park** – A fee would be charged for the tour. There would be both a driver and a tour guide who would give an explanation of the site. It would go from the Mansion area into the heart of the Park and include the vistas, farmland, and other unique features of the site.
- **Improved signage to the Park** – Currently there is very little signage leading to the site. Accessing the site would be facilitated by increasing the number of signs along Interstates and major routes with Park location and distance. However, some signage restrictions exist due to state regulations.
- **Improved traveler information services for visitors** – The Park would benefit from linkages between the town Web site and the Park Web site. The Web site(s) could post real-time information on Park activities, transportation conditions, parking, and congestion. There are opportunities to provide advanced traveler information services in White River Junction, the Park, and in homes via kiosks and the internet to facilitate ride/taxi sharing, provide information on biking/horseback riding/pedestrian access

and activities, and provide train/bus information. This information would facilitate Park access and egress by multiple modes.

- **On-demand shuttle service from bottom of hill to Mansion** – A passenger vehicle could serve as a mini-shuttle accessing the Mansion to assist the handicapped and elderly access the site. The walk is short but has a steep slope. Currently, the Park provides an informal service using a Park jeep when requested.
- **Improved access to site by bicycle** – (e.g., widening of nearby roads, signage to warn autos of bicycle traffic, cross walks)

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP is located in Woodstock, Vermont, approximately 10 miles from U.S. Route 89 and less than a half mile from the center of Woodstock and U.S. Route 4 (see Figure 1). Woodstock, located in eastern Vermont, was incorporated in 1772 and has been a resort town for over a century. Nearby locations include:

- White River Junction, Vermont (nearest train and bus stations) (15 miles);
- Killington, Vermont ski area (20 miles);
- Burlington, Vermont (89 miles); and
- Boston, Massachusetts (140 miles).

2.2 Administration and Classification

The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP was created in 1992, when the Rockefellers gifted the estate's residential and forest lands to the people of the United States. The Park opened to the public six years later, in June 1998. It is the first unit of the NPS to focus on the theme of conservation history and the changing nature of land stewardship in America. It is also Vermont's first national park.

2.3 Physical Description

Size and Facilities – The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP contains 555 acres. The NPS oversees:

- The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller mansion, surrounding residential buildings, gardens, and grounds; and
- The surrounding 555-acre forest land and pastures.

Figure 1. Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park



The Billings Farm and Museum is a separate facility that operates adjacent to and in partnership with the NPS Historical Park. It is located across Route 12 from the NPS site (see Figure 2). The Farm and Museum covers 88 acres (for a combined total of 643 acres of Farm and the NPS land).

Figure 2. Route 12



Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller Mansion – The 19th century Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller mansion contains an extensive art collection with American landscape paintings. It focuses on the conservation movement in the mid to late 1800s and the changing perceptions of the environment by the American public. The mansion is surrounded by other residential facilities, gardens, and landscaped grounds.

Forest – The adjoining forest has been actively managed for wood products, public recreation, aesthetics, education, and ecological values for over a century; it is one of the oldest planned and continuously managed woodlands in America and contains a 14-mile network of historic, unpaved carriage roads and trails (see Figure 3). The park represents several generations of conservationist thought and management. The site has undergone tremendous improvements in the last century to overcome the years of deforestation and overgrazing preceding it.

The NPS Visitor Center – The Visitor Center is situated in a building next to the Mansion. The building was formerly a carriage barn.

Figure 3. Unpaved Carriage Roads and Trails



Billings Farm and Museum – The Billings Farm and Museum is adjacent to the NPS park; the two sites coordinate planning activities and share parking facilities. The Billings Farm and Museum Visitor Center, established in 1983, is privately owned and operated by the Woodstock Foundation, Inc. as an educational institution. The Farm and Museum share a visitor information station with the National Park. This station is located on Billings Farm property, across the street from the NPS site, and includes exhibits, audiovisual programs, and a museum shop. The Billings Farm is a living museum of rural Vermont life including a working dairy farm and information on farm and forestry operations. The 1890 Farm House, located on site, has been restored and furnished to match the 19th century original contains the family living quarters, business operations, creamery, and an ice house. For special events, a horse-drawn wagon is sometimes used to transport visitors around the Farm.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Historical Park

The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP was established by an Act of Congress on August 26, 1992. It is the only national park to focus on conservation history and the evolving nature of land stewardship in America.

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP and the Billings Farm and Museum work together in partnership to present historic and contemporary examples of conservation stewardship and explain the lives and contributions of: George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Billings, and his descendants, and Mary and Laurance S. Rockefeller. In addition, the Park also houses the Conservation Study Institute which collaborates with a variety of partners in Vermont and around the country to promote forestry conservation.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Estimated Visitation – The estimated number of annual visitors is approximately 40,000 (combined visitation to Mansion and forest). This estimate is extremely rough as there is no formal means of counting visitors to the forest and several entry points to the forest exist. Visitor projection estimates indicate that visitation levels could reach 80,000 during the May–October season by the year 2004.

Visitation to the Mansion last year (for six months of visitation) was approximately 20,000. The only formal visitor counts to the park that currently exist are available from the Mansion tours as an entry fee is required. Tours, however, are limited to 12 people per tour with 12 tours a day. The cap on the number of visitors per tour and the number of tours per day could become a constraint on visitation over time. Visits to the Mansion without a tour are not permitted. Visitation last year may have been limited as the Billings Farm and Museum was closed from November through April to allow for expansion of the Billings Farm and Museum Visitor Center.

Visitation is highest from May to October; and lowest from November–April. Visitation reaches its peak during the foliage season in fall. Although no accurate counts are currently available, the park did install beam counters in the forest to count visitors, but as they are new, the park management is unsure of their accuracy.

Optimal Length of Trip – Ideally, a half to a full day or more will allow visitors to fully experience the available programs for both the park and Farm. All the sites are within walking distance of each other.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Transportation Study – A transportation study of park-related transportation issues was conducted by an engineering firm in 1995. Key conclusions include:

- The existing village traffic volume is substantial. Based on park visitation projections, the traffic would increase two percent over regular village traffic in 2004 at the busiest traffic intersection; however this increase will be barely perceptible to the average driver. The remaining four intersections analyzed for the study would not be significantly altered by park traffic (the one that is failing would continue to fail; the remaining three that function well would continue to function well).
- The feasibility of a shuttle system between off site visitor orientation facility (not in existence) and the park was considered. Based on visitor projections, it was estimated that four to six vehicles would be required at a capital cost of \$400,000 and an operating cost of at least \$6,000 per week.

- The existing parking facilities at the Billings Farm and Museum are adequate to serve visitors for the two sites for most of the year according to estimates based on park projections. On the occasions when capacity is reached, overflow parking is met by unpaved, open areas.
- Directional signs are needed to point visitors to the site to eliminate unnecessary time, driving, and to prevent further congestion in the village of Woodstock.

Park Restrictions – According to the terms of the gift of the park, bicycles, snowmobiles, and other motorized vehicles (other than those to maintain the site) are prohibited from park use.

ITS Technology – There is no precedent for the use of ITS technology within the park or town of Woodstock. Even VMS would appear extremely out of character with the image of the town as the town does not have a single traffic signal in operation.

Signage – Signage to locate the site is inadequate. The state of Vermont has a billboard ban which restricts the type of signage permitted for commercial enterprises. This extends to the park as well. Some limited signage directs visitors to the Billings Farm and Museum, which serves to lead the visitors to the park as well. The Park has submitted its request for signage to the state. However, the final result is limited to a modest sign with words but no directional arrows or other graphics.

Parking – The parking area for the park is shared with the Billings Farm and Museum. Although no exact numbers were available for the main paved parking area (approximately 50), there are two additional overflow parking areas, and during peak visitation (foliage season and when the Billings Farm and Museum is hosting a special event), the fields are converted into temporary parking areas. The park did not view parking as a short-term concern.

Biking Safety – Although biking is not permitted on the carriage roads, it is dangerous for visitors who choose to access the park by bicycle. The area roads are very narrow (in some locations the shoulders are only one or two feet wide) and winding. As Route 4 is one of the few east-west routes in Vermont, all the commercial vehicles in the region travel on these roads as well and pass through the center of Woodstock. Numerous by-pass studies have been conducted in recent years, but no financially viable alternative has been identified. “Bike Vermont” is used to promote state tourism, therefore, it would be beneficial to create safer conditions for bikers. The village of Woodstock, with funding from the Vermont Agency of Transportation, is beginning a project to build a bike path along Route 12 which passes in front of the park. This path will be 90 percent on park property, and will enhance bike safety between the village and the park.

Access to Museum and Forest – A key concern expressed by the park superintendent was the difficulty that many visitors have in managing the steep road to the Museum and in reaching the core areas of the park to experience the natural beauty of the park and its vistas. He noted that a growing number of visitors are elderly or in poor physical condition, therefore the number of visitors who can experience the park in full is limited.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Small Town Image – Woodstock is not a typical gateway community as the town, as a tourist location, precedes the creation of the park by a century. The introduction on the Woodstock Web site summarizes well the town planning philosophy: “The area harkens back to simpler times when life and the world was a less complicated place.” This attitude is reflected in the community’s development as well. There is little high-tech equipment on display in the downtown area – a traffic circle there are no traffic lights. The town planner acknowledged freely that most of Woodstock does not wish to change its image of a small, rustic Vermont town. Neither the regional planning commission or the town planner hopes the visitation of the park will increase significantly as the town already reaches its capacity several times a year (usually during foliage season when traffic can be bumper to bumper). There is no desire to make Woodstock “touristy” (e.g., tourist trolleys) – they wish to maintain the character the town has for the enjoyment of the residents as well as those who come to visit. However they would consider a park and ride system that is still dignified and fitting to the area.

Lodging – Many out-of-town visitors to the site will overnight in Woodstock or nearby locations. Exact numbers and percentages are not available. Most visitors will see the site in conjunction with the Billings Farm and Museum, and local attractions within the town of Woodstock itself. No lodging or camping facilities exist for visitors on the park grounds, but many options exist within close proximity to the park (e.g., bed and breakfasts, inns, resort, camping at state parks). Peak visitation in the fall is absorbed by private homes offering temporary bed and breakfast services.

Other Businesses – The village of Woodstock also contains a wide range of shops, restaurants, and other attractions to complement a visit to the park and the Billings Farm and Museum.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The park is committed to maintaining the site as a model farm and forest and demonstrating sustainable forestry and agriculture. As the buildings and cultural features of the park reflect over 200 years of history, no specific period is favored in its preservation. The changes that have been made to the building will be retained, and the site will be viewed in the future as it stands today.

Detailed archeological investigations of the site have not been conducted. There are no known sacred sites or archeological sites of which the park management is currently aware. Future investigations will be conducted in consultation with the Abenaki tribe, which is associated with the area.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Recreational Opportunities – Recreational opportunities include:

- Walking;
- Hiking;
- Bird watching;
- Cross-country skiing;
- Horseback riding;
- Touring the historic structures; and
- Passive appreciation of the pastoral and woodland landscapes.

The park superintendent expressed significant concern that visitors are missing some of the most beautiful areas in the park because of their physical limitations; guided tours (with a tour guide and driver) on a horse-drawn carriage, open tram, or electric transit vehicle into and around the forest areas would promote greater utilization of and appreciation for the park's resources. The superintendent suggested that demand could be met by four to five trips per day during the regular season, but that trips could leave as often as every five minutes during the foliage season to meet demand. Trips to the Pogue (one of the peaks) would take approximately 12 minutes (1.3 miles at 10 miles an hour).

Nearby Recreational Sites – Within a 30-mile radius of the site are:

- Appalachian National Scenic Trail;
- Downhill and cross-country ski areas;
- State parks and forests;
- Science and natural history centers; and
- Historic sites including:
 - Calvin Coolidge birthplace and home (Plymouth Notch, Vermont) and
 - Saint Gaudens National Historic Site (Cornish, New Hampshire).

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

Planning documents identified include:

- *Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP – Draft General Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement*, prepared by the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP, Billings Farm and Museum, Boston Support Office, NPS, U.S. Department of Interior, April 1998.
- *Transportation Study*, conducted by Fay, Spofford, and Thorndike for the NPS, 1995.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The Park works in partnership with the Billings Farm and Museum to illustrate the lives of its founders and educate the public on the role of conservation and preservation.

Other coordination efforts involve:

- **Woodstock Foundation, Inc.** – operates the Billings Farm and Museum;
- **Town of Woodstock** – maintains some adjacent forest land (i.e., Billings Park, Faulkner Park, Mt. Tom);
- **Woodstock Ski Touring Center** – operates cross-country skiing trails under an easement;
- **Conservation Study Institute** – The NPS program created to enhance leadership in the area of conservation and to promote the park’s education and outreach initiatives on conservation stewardship; the Institute collaborates with academic (i.e., University of Vermont) and non-profit partners;
- **Vermont Land Trust** – owns by bequest the King Farm, a historical site which is adjacent to the NPS site; and
- **U.S. Forest Service** – conducts a collaborative forestry project with the park.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The NHP could benefit from ATS both to enhance the visitor experience of the site, as well as to improve access to it. The site itself could benefit from improved transportation systems as the physical conditions (e.g., steep slope, expanse of forest land) of the site create

difficulties for many visitors to fully experience the park's resources, particularly the forest. Because of the limitations imposed by the deed to the site and the character of the town alternative transportation for this park needs to be functional and still remain consistent with the historical and rustic surroundings. Additional transportation strategies for accessing the NHP are needed in part to address the congestion that at times can be quite severe in the town of Woodstock and in part to create safe and environmentally friendly alternatives to car use.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

Some options for ATS to access and experience the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP, include the following:

- Horse-drawn carriages into the park to permit more visitors to see the site (e.g., charge fee, includes explanation of site, have both driver and tour guide);
- Improved signage to the park (e.g., approximately 10 signs ranging in size, located along Interstates and major routes with park location and distance; size and number limited by state regulations);
- Improved traveler information services visitor (e.g., linkages between town Web site and park, ITS opportunities to facilitate ride/taxi sharing, provision of information on biking/horseback riding/pedestrian access and activities);
- On-demand shuttle service from bottom of hill to Mansion (passenger vehicle to assist handicapped and elderly with steep slope; now provided informally by park jeep when requested);
- Improved access to site by bicycle (e.g., widening of nearby roads, signage to warn autos of bicycle traffic, cross walks); and
- Traveler information services in White River Junction to facilitate intermodal access via train, bus, shared taxi, etc. (e.g., advanced traveler information system).

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park – Draft General Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement, prepared by the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, Billings Farm and Museum, Boston Support Office, National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior, April 1998.

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP Web site, <http://www.nps.gov/mabi>.

Transportation study (summary), conducted by Fay, Spofford, and Thorndike for the National Park Service, 1995.

Woodstock, Vermont Web site, <http://www.woodstockvt.com>.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Rolf Diamant, Park Superintendent, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP, National Park Service

John Gilbert, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP, National Park Service

Kevin Geiger, Senior Planner, Two Rivers – Ottauquechee Regional Commission

Don Bourdon, Special Projects, Two Rivers – Ottauquechee Regional Commission

Michael Brands, Town Planner, Village of Woodstock